

Silence as a Rhetorical Strategy of Resistance in Indira Goswami's Novels *Chinnamasta* and *Nilkanthi Braja*

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Abstract

The significance of Indira Goswami in the Assamese literary canon arises from her consideration of social realities such as widowhood, marginalization, and systemic oppression over an extended period of time. Her narratives are therefore positioned as feminist interventions that mix fear, frustration, fury, and quiet rebellion while stopping short of being mere social documentation. The resilience articulated in silence in Goswami's fiction is studied. This is examined through the close reading of Nilkanthi Braja and Chinnamasta, which finds silence highly charged as a mode of protest in the context of strict social and religious pressures. The protagonists, predominantly being widows and women in the margins, try to reject oppression verbally but soon find that language cannot oppose structures supported by patriarchal power. When language becomes an accomplice in an act of persecution and exclusion, the resistance only shifts to the silent and vulnerable naked human body. In Goswami's fiction, silence does not symbolize being passive; rather, it is embodied in the form of righteous anger against festering injustices. The mute body becomes a potent site for protest: endurance and restraint act to heighten the very intensity of dissent. Through her graphic and disturbing portrayals of violence against women's silent bodies, Goswami provides a screaming voice to those rendered voiceless and confronts the reader with the ethical and political ramifications of enforced silence. Thus, this study showcases how Goswami recuperates silence as an instrument and rhetorical tool in her fiction, claiming the power to resist and articulate resilience beyond speech.

I. INTRODUCTION

"The spaces between and around words can have their unspoken resonances. [Like music, writing is] a communication without words in

which the silences count as much as the notes" (Graham Swift 103)

A propensity to falsely associate Silence with absence, blankness and void can be observed in most readings of literature. However,

considering that silence is not the opposite of speech, this tendency is not just preposterous, but dangerous as well. Silence in literature is often a deliberate decision to not use words or to express mistrust in verbal language. "That we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence" (74) perceives Ludwig Wittgenstein. Only through liberation from the shackles of written language can conclusive and absolute communication become feasible. Literature often employs silence effectively to express traumatic experiences and complex psychological predicaments. Narratives also break off into mere painful fragmented murmurs or trail off into absolute silence. The reader is assigned the task of putting the pieces of silence together to give life to a story that the writer chooses not to verbalize. Oftentimes, these unheard voices are strong statements of protest. Totality within literary discourse can be achieved only through an empathetic recognition and acceptance of the reticence of both the author and their characters. A character's silence may reveal more than what it conceals- sometimes even offering strong political stances, especially in a post-colonial or feminist backdrop.

Indira Goswami foregrounds the "Colonial truth" which she feels can only be comprehensively expressed through silence. Gayatri Spivak's germinal essay *Can the Subaltern Speak* echoes this wilful silence "If in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (32)

Most of Goswami's works are a reflection of her own helpless self and her protagonists are mainly widows, like herself. While some of her women opt for absolute compliance, others challenge the rigid social and religious stigmatization of widowhood. For instance, widows like Saudamini in *Nilkanti Braja* and Jatadhari in *Chinnamasta* are non-conformists who initially strive to dissociate themselves from the staunch Brahminical community that shunned them. They try to make their voices heard and to question the obnoxious social setup. They realize that since claims to power and patriarchy are made through the medium of language, the ultimate protest can be achieved only through dissociation from this medium.

The key to emancipation, they understand, lies not in voice, but in the lack of it. The present study attempts to gain a lucid understanding of how the Goswami widows in *Nilkanti Braja* and *Chinnamasta* manipulate their silence to achieve fierce resistance.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Although plenty of research has been carried out on various aspects of Goswami's works, the theme of Silence still remains untouched. Most relevant being Papari Das's (2014) study on women in Goswami's fiction, Ravi Bhusan's (2014) analyses on the foul side of widowhood in Goswami's *Nilkanthi Braja*, Neha Arora's (2014) views on the fate of women and Culture and origin of the Kamakhya Temple in Indira Goswami's *The Man from Chinnamasta: An Analytical Study* - Shikha Thakur and Madhu Bala (2021) locates the narrative within the cultural-historical site of the temple-Kamakhya- and the practice of Shakti worship, analyzing how Goswami's narrative itself critiques sacrificial ritual practice and engages local religious symbolism. This study aims to bridge the gap in research by analysing the distinct and powerful ways in which silence is employed by Goswami's women to mark their protest. Indira Goswami's novels *Nilkanthi Braja* or *The Blue Necked God* and *Chinnamasta* or *The Headless Goddess* become remarkably pertinent to this study as it blatantly exposes the pitfalls of staunch, patriarchal religious practices. This study employs the methodology of detailed textual analysis of the novels to show how Silence has been employed as a powerful weapon for resistance. It is usually used to study the language, symbols or pictures in a given text, thereby providing social, political and cultural relevance to those meanings. The present study opts for this methodology due to its considerable reliability and efficiency.

III. EMBODIED SILENCE AND FEMINIST RESISTANCE IN INDIRA GOSWAMI'S FICTION

Indira Goswami is one of the victims of this institutionalised hypocrisy, and has renounced many patriarchal and regressive Brahminical customs that oppress women. Being a Brahmin

widow herself, she voices the plight of such women and conclusively drives home the point that, why a mere verbal protest is not just gruelling, but futile as well. The centrality of the mute and vulnerable human body is also exalted in her novels. It is through the body that the codification of political, religious, and cultural demographics takes place. The physicality of female bodies makes them more susceptible to social persecution. In fact, widowhood, the ultimate curse on a Brahmin woman, is imposed on her solely by virtue of her biological femininity. Through graphic narrations of the tortures and humiliation inflicted on the body, she addresses the most basic pitfalls of cultural and religious practices. Goswami celebrates the silence of the human body- the abuse it endures and the vehement protest it is capable of. The brahmin widow is a piteous being, condemned to a life of emotional immolation. She is deprived of freedom, decency, and even the right to have cooked food or physical possessions. To top it all, she is not allowed to step out of her home, lest she brings misfortune to those who happen to lay eyes on her cursed body!

The ideal widow should be an invisible one, silent even in her body, like a “Ghost pretending to be a human being” (Goswami 10). However, Goswami through her novels *Nilkanthi Braja* and *Chinnamasta*, give both voice and body to the ‘ghost-like widows’. The silence of their bodies is amplified and exalted into a deafening roar until it is heard. Through elaborate commentary on the torments inflicted on widows’ bodies and minds, Goswami imparts voice to the silent. The body is seen not as a mute, physical object, anymore but as an entity capable of raging protest.

Nilkanthi Braja is one of Indira Goswami’s most daring works- not just because she gives voice to mute human bodies, but also because she exposes the corruption within Hindu religious institutions. The novel traces the helpless plight of Saudamini, a recently widowed young girl who is brought in to the ostensibly Holy city of Vrindavan by her parents against her will. She is the prototype of what writer Sarah Grand terms “New Woman”. Saudamini, unlike other servile widows, is initially rebellious and tries to hold radical conversations with her parents to

dissuade them from sending her to Vrindavan. She also expresses her rebellion by revealing her secret Christian lover.

As all her frantic efforts to communicate go in vain, Saudamini realizes the futility of language and the subsequent futility of discourses held in that medium. It was from then that she dissociated from the pointless practice of speech and began adopting the powerful doctrine of silence instead. Saudamini, an embodiment of ‘New Woman’ defies conventions and calls out on societal injustices through a fearsome lack of language. She opts for a brutal silent abidance to the regressive brahminical norms as a symbol of dissent and to prove that silence is in fact stronger than discourse. Through descriptions of tortures inflicted on the silent bodies of the widows in Vrindavan, Goswami is able to distinctly and stridently voice out the pitfalls in the execution of religion.

Saudamini is an observer of the monstrosities that take place within the Hindu temples of Vrindavan. She witnesses the unspeakable tribulation that her fellow widows- the nameless, voiceless and homeless *Radheswamis*, are being subjected to. Their voices have been appropriated by the temple priests or the *Pandas*, who force the women to “sing the Lord’s praises as loud as they could even if they were on the verge of choking” (Goswami 23). The bleak picture of Vrindavan that Goswami paints is quite contrary to the popular beliefs surrounding the city. Instead of being the breeding ground of spirituality and sanctity, Vrindavan swarms with sexual predators. Saudamini encounters A young widow Shashiprova reveals the darkest and most vile sexual secrets of the holy city: “For a long time I have spent serving the temple’s Lord Damodar. Now I will have to live with Alamgari as his mistress.... Can you imagine anything worse than this?” (Goswami 65)

Saudamini towards the end of the novel is presented with the opportunity to break free from this suffering and reunite with her Christian lover. However, it is at this juncture that the young woman displays immense courage and resistance. As a token of prodigious indignation at the institutionalized maltreatment of widows, Saudamini chooses to

undertake the utmost rebellion- eternal silence. Saudamini's suicide resonates with the denunciation of Brahminism, its rigid patriarchy, and its associated practices, rendering a statement louder than any language could ever have aspired to.

Chinnamasta, the Headless Goddess, is among the most powerful and disturbing novels written by Indira Goswami. The novel is set in a ritualistic and religious space filled by the Kamakhya Temple in Assam. The very architecture of this novel draws its symbolic core from the savage Hindu goddess Chinnamasta, one who supposedly cuts off her own head to give nourishment to others, embodying paradoxes of sacrifice, annihilation, and regeneration. Goswami uses this powerfully mythic figure to interrogate the lived experiences of women enmeshed within patriarchal, caste-ridden, and religiously sanctioned systems of oppression.

The narrative revolves around Jatadhari, an ascetic woman living near the temple, who becomes deeply involved in its ritual economy. The whole world around her is dominated by priests, tantric practices, and animal sacrifice, in which cruelty and exploitation coexist with divine devotion. In this world, widows and lower-caste women, along with young girls, undergo emotional, physical, and sexual violence in the name of faith and tradition. For Goswami, such religion is not really a liberator of the spirit; it is an institution that disciplines and devours the female body.

Death, mutilation, and the poverty of one's physical being and destruction of spirit-these are the usual packages of the bodily suffering and lack of agency trampling underfoot the very spirit of womanhood. The chosen few labelled by the author as 'heroines' never throw up manifest forms of rebellion against given social systems; only through withdrawal and endurance, bodily refusal, and unscreaming defiance do they come to express their silent suffering. The physicality of a woman's body becomes a battle site where power is inscribed and contested. The visualization of blood, suffering, and pain brings home the gendered violence suffered by women, blurring the

delineation between ritual sacrifice and daily gendered suffering.

The metaphoric relationship of goddess Chinnamasta has dominated the novel. Silencing and fragmentation of womanhood are symbolized by the headless criteria of Chinnamasta. The decapitation represents an insight into the utter destruction of female values imposed by patriarchy in the name of self-sacrifice. Goswami reinterprets the goddess not as a figure of divine empowerment, but rather as a reflection of the brutal contradictions inherent in a system that glorifies suffering whilst obliterating a woman's voice.

Chinnamasta proves to be a blistering indictment of religious hypocrisy, ritualized violence, and patriarchal domination. With a restrained narrative strung with symbols and bodily imagery, Goswami here articulates a politics of silence in which suffering itself becomes a form of protest. The novel forces a confrontation with the troubling intersections of faith and power, gender and body, and establishes *Chinnamasta* as a landmark feminist work of contemporary Indian literature.

IV. SILENT BODIES, SACRED DISCOURSE, AND FEMINIST RESISTANCE

The power of silence and the enormous capability of the physical body is foregrounded in Goswami's fiction. The title of her novel *Nilkanthi Braja*, is a reminder of the immense might of silence as depicted in Hindu mythology. Nilkanth is Lord Siva who silently swallows the poison which could otherwise wipe out all creation. Siva's decision to silently endure torment in view of the greater good is much reminiscent of how Goswami's widows choose to sacrifice themselves as a protest. Both Lord Siva and the Goswami's widows' resort to the sheer silent physicality of their bodies, and not linguistic deliberation, to make themselves heard.

Traditionally silence has been interpreted as an indication of subordination or erasure, especially in stories on underclass women. Some feminist and poststructuralist critics, however, have redefined silence as a rhetorical strategy that stems from the control of speech

by power structures. This is where silence in Indira Goswami's *Chinnamasta* and *Nilkanthi Braja* operates not as a lack of agency but as a mode of resistance enacted within oppressive Brahminical, religious, and gendered systems. When language becomes complicit with authority, silence is endowed with political and ethical force.

Both works synchronize language and institutional power. Religious injunctions, ritual prescriptions, and patriarchal moral codes stand with one another through discourse to legitimize women's marginalization. Power, as Michel Foucault highlights, is something that works through discourse in terms of regulating who speaks and what may be spoken (Power/Knowledge 131). In *Nilkanthi Braja*, widows initially resort to verbal tussle as a way of voicing their pain, but sooner or later realize they cannot do it because in this system their social identity has been already obliterated. Goswami captures poignancy when the widows come to understand that "words no longer carry meaning once a woman is marked by widowhood" (52). In this light, silence becomes an intentional refusal to enter a linguistic economy structured by exclusion from patriarchal privilege.

All this relates to *Chinnamasta*, which is one of the kinds of sacred space, namely Kamakhya Temple, suffused with ritual speech-chants, explanations, and doctrinal narratives that sanctify violence. Jatadhari's resistance clearly lies in her abstaining from entering into this kind of verbal economy. Her silence stands in stark contrast to the ceaselessly surrounding ever-going religious discourse. Goswami describes that the temple fills the air with voices, "but the suffering body remains unheard" (*Chinnamasta* 67). In this, silence says much to testify about the moral vacuousness of religious rhetoric and foregrounds suffering, which speech tries to cover.

Elaine Scarry's argument that physical pain "resists language" and literally destroys it significantly applies to what Goswami underscores in the body (*The Body in Pain* 4). Both novels present pain as something that transcends verbal articulation and touches on

the female body, and in *Chinnamasta*, with the continuous imagery about blood and sacrifice, parallels the kind this exploitation brings forth in ritual systems. It is with silent endurance of female bodies that protests unveil the violence concealed by the sacred discourse. (Goswami, *Chinnamasta*,. 88-90.) Her descriptions force the reader to face the pain institutional language would standardize.

Judith Butler's theory of performativity further elucidates the political implications of silence in Goswami's fiction. Butler asserts that gender norms exist through the repeated social performance that ensues (*Gender Trouble* 179). In *Nilkanthi Braja*, there are acts of visible performing misery that validates widowhood, with even ties of required obedience and verbal submission. The expected performances now come undone when the widow retires to silence. Their silence is anti-performance in such a context, operating as a subversion to the patriarchal script demanding vocal compliance (Goswami 74-76).

Goswami resonates with the subaltern point of view both in India's political economy and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's assertion that the subaltern cannot "speak" easily within hegemonic discourse ("Can the Subaltern Speak?" 287). Rather than pushing marginalized women into unheard modes of articulation, Goswami allows silence, gesture, and corporeal endurance to function as other semiotic forms. In *Chinnamasta*, for example, Jatadhari's silence says nothing toward proving her religiously sanctioned value; it exposes violence embedded in sacredness (Goswami 101).

V. CONCLUSION

Silence is not romanticized by Goswami. It is usually the product of coercion, fatigue, and systemic denial of agency. Yet the consistent juxtaposition of silence vis-a-vis the verbosity of patriarchal justification reinterprets it as intransigent resistance. Where institutions speak to justify injustice, the protagonists' silence becomes more forceful. Through *Chinnamasta* and *Nilkanthi Braja*, there, Goswami broadens the grammar of resistance

and exposes silence as a rhetorical strategy when language itself fails.

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